

Report of Director of Children's Services

Report to Children and Families Scrutiny Board

Date: 26 April 2012

Subject: Response to Scrutiny inquiry report – external placements

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. This report sets out the Director of Children's Services response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) inquiry into the external placements of looked after children, published on the 28th of February 2012.

Recommendations

1. Members are requested to approve the proposed responses as outlined in this report.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 This report sets out the response of the director of children's services to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) inquiry into the external placements of looked after children, published on the 28th of February 2012.

2 Background information

- 2.1 Reducing the number of looked after children is one of the three 'obsessions' of the Children and Young People's plan. The Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) identified that the cost of external placements for looked after children is the key budget challenge for children's services and that reducing expenditure in relation to independent fostering agency and residential placements is essential if investment in the preventative and early intervention services necessary to 'turn the curve' on the number of looked after children is to be sustained. Therefore, the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) focused their inquiry on external placements.
- 2.2 The Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) undertook their inquiry between September and December 2012. The purpose of the inquiry was to make an assessment of and, where appropriate, make recommendations on:
- § opportunities to safely reduce reliance on external placements; and
 - § scope to reduce the cost of external placements that continue to be needed.
- 2.3 In undertaking its inquiry the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) gathered and evaluated a wide range of evidence including written reports, verbal evidence, visits and observations. The report resulting from the inquiry is comprehensive and makes a total of twelve recommendations. The report recognises the considerable work that has been undertaken by children's services and partners to stabilise the number of looked after children in Leeds but identifies that the numbers have not yet 'turned the curve'. Consequently, seven of the recommendations request an update on progress in relation to key elements of the strategy to reduce the number of looked after children and the associated costs.
- 2.4 The director of children's services has accepted all the recommendations. A Looked After Children Programme Group has been established within children's services to drive forward the strategy for turning the curve on the number of looked after children. This group is chaired by the deputy director (safeguarding, specialist and targeted services) and brings together key staff from across children's services. The group will produce a comprehensive report on progress to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 This section considers each of the twelve recommendations made by the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) in their report and the response from the director of children's services.

3.2 Recommendation 1 – That the director of children’s services reports back to us on how local communities can be more proactively engaged in the support to vulnerable families.

3.2.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. Given the size and complexity of Leeds working effectively at a local level to address needs of vulnerable children is fundamental to the strategy to reduce the number of children becoming looked after. Cluster arrangements have been identified as the most effective mechanism to coordinate local arrangements for service delivery. A wide range of services are being aligned to local clusters, these include children’s centres, (which will be further strengthened by health visitors later in the year), and attendance improvement officers. On 5 March 2012, the children’s social work teams were re-organised on a local geographical basis to support cluster working. Clusters are provided with a range of management information, which includes the number of referrals, children subject to a child protection plan and looked after children from the cluster. This will help to ensure that the work of the cluster is focused on the most vulnerable children in the area. It is recognised that some clusters are more advanced than others and targeted service leaders are being rolled out in the coming year across the city to assist clusters in developing local strategies.

3.2.2 A range of tools are available to clusters. These include Outcomes Based Accountability, the Top 100 Methodology and the Common Assessment Framework. The latter has been revised following consultation with partners, including the voluntary sector, and the simplified record and process has been welcomed and will enable clusters to provide more effective preventative and early intervention services.

3.2.3 The Child Friendly City initiative will be used to focus attention on all children, including those most at risk of poor outcomes. The initiative will provide an opportunity for the Leeds community to engage in supporting vulnerable children.

3.3 Recommendation 2 – That the director of children’s services provides six monthly updates to us on progress in tackling the budget pressure relating to the cost of external placements. The first report is required July 2012.

3.3.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services and will be included in the report to the Board in July 2012. Expenditure on external placements has been modelled for 2012/13 predicated on a reduction in both the number and costs of looked after children during the year. Progress is monitored by the children's services senior management team and the Looked After Children Programme Group.

3.4 Recommendation 3 – That the director of children’s services provides a report in July 2012 on savings on the cost of external placements achieved in 2011/12 against the £500k projection, including progress with health contributions.

3.4.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services and will be included in the report to the Board in July 2012. Arrangements to improve commissioning have been strengthened and work has been undertaken with other authorities in the region to improve the quality and reduce the cost of external placements.

3.5 Recommendation 4 – That the director of children’s services reports to us in July 2012 with an update on progress against each of the key milestones in the programme plan, the majority of which are due to have been achieved by then.

3.5.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. The Looked After Children Programme Board, chaired by the deputy director (safeguarding, specialist and targeted services), is responsible for driving the turning the curve action plan. The group meets on a fortnightly basis to implement the strategy and monitor progress in relation to each of the key milestones in the action plan and to set new targets where necessary. The group will produce a comprehensive report on progress to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012.

3.6 Recommendation 5 – That the director of children’s services reports back to us in July 2012 on progress in launching the fostering recruitment website, and if up and running the impact it has had so far.

3.6.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. Considerable work has already taken place to revise the recruitment strategy for foster carers including the development of a new website which is due to be launched shortly. A report on progress on recruitment, including the impact of the website, will be provided to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012.

3.7 Recommendation 6 – That the Corporate Carers group explores the potential to arrange social events and opportunities for foster carers and children to develop networks.

3.7.1 The director of children’s services has discussed this with the chair of the Corporate Carers group and they accept this recommendation. Some work has already been done through the group to raise the profile of foster carers and a dedicated budget of £10,000 has been established to enable members to undertake events to support foster carer recruitment and retention.

3.8 Recommendation 7 – That the director of children’s services reviews the payment structure for foster care with particular reference to the impact of the differential between in-house and independent fostering agency rates and reports to the Scrutiny Board with the outcome of this review in July 2012.

3.8.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. A review of the payment structure for foster care is underway and fees have already been increased to bring them in line with the new Department of Education

recommended rates which were set in April 2012. Although it has not concluded it is clear that, so long as Leeds remains dependent on high numbers of independent fostering agency placements, it cannot compete with independent agencies on costs. However, the review is highlighting that in comparison with most independent agencies Leeds offers a greater degree of training and support foster carer. Therefore, the review will explore how this can be improved further. Recognising the contribution that foster carers make to vulnerable children in Leeds will be a key feature of the Child Friendly City strategy, which will provide opportunities for businesses and communities to support foster carers. The outcome of the review will be reported to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012.

3.9 Recommendation 8 – That the director of children’s services explores what good practice might be learned from the Tees consortium for the sub-regional work on placement commissioning that is currently taking place in West Yorkshire.

3.9.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. As part of their work with the other authorities in the region, the commissioning unit has examined the approaches taken by a range of other consortia including the Tees and North West of England consortia to identify best practice and ensure that these are incorporated in the approaches adopted by the West Yorkshire authorities.

3.10 Recommendation 9 – That the director of children’s services works with the director of environment and neighbourhoods to secure support from the ALMOs to meet the accommodation needs of foster carers.

3.10.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. The directors of children's services and environment and neighbourhoods and their senior leadership teams meet regularly. There is already a protocol in place with environment and neighbourhoods and ALMO's which ensures that foster carers and kinship carers have priority status. Children's services have established good links with Housing ALMOs and are working with them to identify suitable properties to support the redesign of residential services.

3.11 Recommendation 10 – That the director of children’s services reports back to us in July 2012 on what formalised input foster carers should have into the review process for children they care for, and how improvements can be made to ensure that their input is considered in practice.

3.11.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children's services. The importance of the role that foster carers have in lives of looked after children is recognised in the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations which identifies foster carers as one of the key participants in reviews of looked after children. It is important that foster carers are supported to make a contribution to the reviews of children that they care for and that their views are given proper consideration. It is recognised that the review process for looked after children can be complex and stressful for participants, particularly children. The integrated safeguarding unit has been established to support continuing improvement in the quality of

practice. The unit brings together the independent reviewing officers and child protection chairs. Key to both of these processes is ensuring that all participants including children, parents and carers are supported to make a positive contribution and that decisions take account of all views. A report will be presented to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012 setting out how foster carers can contribute to the review process.

3.12 Recommendation 11 – That the director of children’s services presents the initial residential care review outcomes to us at the April 2012 meeting for comment, with a further update on improvement progress required in July 2012.

3.12.1 This recommendation is accepted. A report on progress of the initial residential review is available to the meeting and a further update will be presented to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012.

3.13 Recommendation 12 – That the director of children’s services provides a report to the Scrutiny Board in July 2012 on the decision making capacity of carers when supporting children in their care and how this could be improved to promote autonomy and consistency.

3.13.1 This recommendation is accepted by the director of children’s services. Some guidance in relation to decisions that are delegated to foster carers is contained in the Foster Carer handbook. However, it is recognised that this needs to be revised to promote autonomy and consistency in decision making. Draft guidance has been developed in consultation with foster carers and this will be launched at the end of June. The director of children’s services will provide a report on the new guidance to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) meeting in July 2012.

4 Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and engagement

4.1.1 The Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) consulted widely as part of their review.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

4.2.1 Equality and diversity screening was not required as a response to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) recommendations. These issues will be considered in the report to the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) in July 2012.

4.3 Council policies and city priorities

4.3.1 There are no immediate implications for council policy and governance.

4.4 Resources and value for money

4.4.1 The recommendations will be resourced from within existing Children's Services staffing and budgets, and funding is secured within the approved budget for 2012/13.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information and call in

4.5.1 None

4.6 Risk management

4.6.1 The risks associated with the recommendations are managed by the Looked After Children Programme Group which is chaired by the deputy director (safeguarding, specialist and targeted services)

5 Conclusions

5.1 The Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) inquiry into external placements has identified some important learning for children's services. The recommendations it makes will help the service to strengthen practice and enable the Scrutiny Board to monitor progress in this area. The actions proposed in response to these recommendations will ensure that this is the case, and that work with staff and service users relating to external placements is taken forward effectively in the future.

6 Recommendations

6.1 Members are requested to approve the proposed responses as outlined in this report.

7 Background documents

7.1 Report of the Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) inquiry into external placements